

Rules of the Game

Reading Spell Descriptions (Part Three)

By Skip Williams



Last time, we took a quick tour of spell schools, subschools, and descriptors. This week, we move on to spell levels and components.

Level

The third entry in a spell header shows the spell's level, which rates the spell's power relative to other spells. A spell's level can vary depending on who's casting the spell, if so, that is shown here. For example, *dominate person* is a 4th-level spell for bard, but a 5th-level spell for a sorcerer or wizard.

When an interaction between two spells depends on the spell's levels, use whatever level the caster is using. For example, *globe of invulnerability* excludes spell effects of 4th level or lower. The globe would exclude a *dominate person* spell from a bard, but not from a sorcerer or wizard.

If you don't know the spell's level, you usually can figure it out. For example, spell-like abilities usually use a spell's sorcerer/wizard spell levels (see page 315 in the *Monster Manual*, or Rules of the Game: All About Spell-like Abilities, Part Three). If a spell comes from a magical device, you can infer the spell level from the item's market price, as noted in Chapter 8 of the *Dungeon Master's Guide*. Failing that, the methods you use for determining a spell-like ability's level also work for a magic item.

Components

The fourth entry in a spell header shows the components that the spell requires. Most of the time, a spell's components do not affect play very much. Occasionally, however, they can become critical. Here's an overview.

- **Verbal (V):** You must be able to speak in a strong voice to complete a verbal component. If you're gagged, you can't complete a verbal component. If a foe grapples you and pins you, you cannot speak (and thus cannot complete a verbal component) unless your foe allows you to speak.

Silence spells keep you from using verbal components.

If you've been deafened, any spell you cast has a 20% failure chance if it has a verbal component. If you already have a failure chance from armor or a shield, you must check each failure chance separately.

- **Somatic (S):** You must have at least one hand free to complete a somatic component. The rules don't go into any detail about when you have a hand "free," but here are some general guidelines.

Your hand is free when you aren't carrying a weapon, a piece of equipment, or (usually) a shield. You can strap a buckler to your arm and use your hand to wield a weapon (albeit at a penalty), so there's no reason you couldn't

use your buckler hand for a somatic component. The buckler might interfere a little bit, but that's what the arcane spell failure chance for the buckler is for. You also can strap a light shield to your forearm and still carry items in that hand, but you can't use the hand for anything else (such as wielding a weapon), so there's no good reason you should be able to use that hand to complete a somatic component. Since manipulating a material component (including a focus) is part of casting the spell, it's best to consider the hand that holds the material component or focus as "free" for purposes of completing a somatic component.

You cannot cast a spell with a somatic component if you're grappling (either when you're the attacker in the grapple or the defender), when you're pinned, or when you're immobilized in some way (such as when you're tied up).

- **Material (M):** Although the rules don't mention it, common sense dictates that you must have a hand free to manipulate a material component for a spell (see the notes on somatic components, above).

When you're grappling, you can try to cast a spell with a material component (but not with a somatic component) provided you have the material component in your hand when you begin the spell. If you don't have the material component in hand, you must first use a full-round action to get it. Since you used a full-round action to retrieve the component, you can't cast the spell until your next turn. You can't cast a spell with a material component if you're pinned.

Most material components have a negligible cost and they're assumed to be part of your spell component pouch. If you lose that pouch you're pretty much out of luck for casting spells with material components unless you can talk your DM into letting you forage for them or shop for them separately.

Here's an unofficial rule for foraging: Make a Survival check (DC 10) in much the same manner you'd forage for supplies (see the Survival skill description). On a successful check you find one component. If your check result exceeds 10, you find one additional component for every 2 points your check result exceeds 10. If you have 5 or more ranks of Spellcraft or Knowledge (arcana), you get a +2 bonus on the check (or +4 if you have 5 or more ranks in each skill). You can obtain spell components of only negligible cost by foraging.

If you are in some locale where you can shop for spell components, you probably can buy a new spell component pouch. If that's not possible, you can shop for components using the same method described above, but a Gather Information check makes more sense than a Survival check.

Some material components are valuable enough to have a cost listed in the spell description. Such material components are never included in a spell component pouch, and you must buy them separately (though there is no reason why you could not store them in a spell component pouch after you've bought them).

No matter what a material component costs, you use it up when you cast a spell with it. The component is expended even if the spell fails for some reason (such as being disrupted while casting, missing a spell failure chance, or whatever).

A spell component pouch effectively has an unlimited supply of material components for your own spells (but only material components with negligible cost). In effect, you are assumed to refill your pouch just by poking around in your spare time. When you use a material component that has a cash value, you'll need to buy a replacement before you can cast the spell again.

Although it's not mentioned in the rules, two or more spellcasters can share a spell component pouch. As an

unofficial rule of thumb, you can assume that a character's pouch holds enough of any particular material component each day to cast that spell twice as many times as the caster can cast spells of that level. For example, a 1st-level wizard with an Intelligence score of 15 has a pouch that contains enough material components to cast any particular 1st-level spell four times a day. If the character shares his spell component pouch, he could easily run out of components for the day. Keep in mind that this is an off-the-cuff rule to cover a fairly unlikely situation. It's not intended as a way for stingy PCs to wiggle out of paying a measly 5 gp for a spell component pouch. DMs should free to adjust it as necessary to suit their campaigns.

- **Focus (F):** For all intents and purposes, a focus is merely a material component that isn't consumed when you cast the spell. Everything in the section on material components also applies to focuses (except the part about them being consumed), with the following exceptions:

If you're forced to forage for a focus with a negligible cost, the DC to find one is 15, and you can locate an additional focus with a negligible cost for every 5 points by which your check exceeds 15.

A spell component pouch typically contains one focus with a negligible cost for each spell that you know that also requires such a focus.

- **Divine Focus (DF):** This is simply a focus that has some spiritual significance for you. Usually it's your holy symbol. Divine focuses aren't included in spell component pouches.

In some cases, the arcane version of a spell will have a material component or a focus and the divine version will have a divine focus. In that case, the two differing components are listed and separated by a slash; for example M/DF. See page 173 in the *Player's Handbook* for details.

- **XP Cost (XP):** When you cast a spell with an XP cost, you pay that cost when you cast the spell, even if the spell fails for some reason, and your experience total is immediately reduced. According to the rules, you can never spend so much experience that you lose a level -- though you can delay gaining a level and instead keep your experience points available for spellcasting (or item creation). If you do so, you always can change your mind. That is, you can gain a new level any time you have enough experience to do so, even after delaying awhile. For example, suppose you're a 9th-level cleric, which gives you access to the *commune* spell, which has an XP cost of 100 XP. Your current XP total is 45,052. You have enough experience to become a 10th-level character, but if you do you won't be able to cast your *commune* spell because doing so would reduce your experience total to 44,952 and you'd drop back to 9th level. You can choose to delay becoming a 10th-level character until your experience total is 45,100 gp or more. Once you pass that milestone, you can add a character level. Once you make the decision to add the level, however, you're bound to the rule preventing you from spending so much XP that you lose a level.

What's Next?

Next week, we'll look at spell casting times and ranges.

About the Author

Skip Williams keeps busy with freelance projects for several different game companies and has just completed

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